DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 505 CS 504 636

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TITLE Organizational Communication Theory and Practice Courses in the Undergraduate Curriculum.
PUB DATE May 84
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (34th, San Francisco, CA, May 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Planning; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Course Content; Course Descriptions; *Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Enrichment; Education Work Relationship; Higher Education; *Organizational Communication; Practicums; Speech Instruction; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The philosophy, objectives, and assignments and projects of Ohio University's introductory course in organizational communication and its practicum in organizational communication are described in this paper. After presenting a brief overview of the undergraduate curriculum at the university and its relation to organizational communications, the paper discusses the philosophy and four representative objectives of the introductory course: (1) to establish a firm understanding of theories useful for explaining communication processes in the organizational context; (2) to specify the communication activities of organizations and provide an understanding of the expectations organizations may have for these activities; (3) to develop the capacity to apply theoretical explanations to organizational settings; and (4) to encourage students to criticize theories for their inadequacies, then develop their own alternative explanations. The remainder of the paper explains the philosophy and objectives of the senior practicum, which includes familiarizing students with organizational processes in a real organization, enabling students to assume organizational roles that mirror actual experience, providing students with the means to demonstrate the extent to which they understand organizational concepts, helping them progress in the application of the skills and knowledge learned in other courses, and providing the capstone experience in the organizational communication major's career. (CRH)

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

COURSES IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

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Presented to the

International Communication Association
Convention, San Francisco, May, 1984.

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CS 504 636

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY AND PRACTICE COURSES IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of a poster session at the 1984 ICA convention is just one indication of the growth of Organizational Communication as an area of academic study and professional application. The program at Ohio University strives constantly in developing its courses to meld the academic needs of the student with the opportunity to apply the theories and skills learned in the classroom in an organizational setting.

The handbooks on course development present a very rational and ordered process for designing courses. Instructors are urged to first develop some general statement of the philosophy which is to guide the development of the course. From this philosophy should come a set of specific cognitive and behavioral objectives. Within the framework of philosophy and objectives, texts are selected, lectures, assignments and projects are developed, all to aid students in reaching the objectives. However reasonable this model appears, chances are that few courses are developed in such an orderly process. Fortunately, course development is often a much more haphazard affair, in which each component of the model is inter-productive with all the others. An instructor gets an idea for an appealing new project which in turn helps refine some vague feeling about the philosophy of the course. A colleague shares a syllabus and some

objective statement stands out and suggests new alternatives for the lectures. A new text is found, and the instructor begins to re-think the goals for the course. It's probably the bumbling and constant refinement which makes the stuff necessary for good teaching.

The rational model for course development is not without its utility. Although not to be taken for its developmental connotations, the laying out of philosophy, objectives, and assignments provides instructors with two direct benefits. First, it provides the opportunity for instructors to continually re-examine the fit of the various components of the course. If instructors are not able to find some logic which accounts for the various elements of the course, how can we expect students to see how the pieces come together? Second, the rational model provides a convenient set of terms by which colleagues can discuss their courses in the continuing attempt to refine their classroom performance. By sharing ideas, examining new alternatives, and articulating those things which are too often taken for granted, instructors have the opportunity to critically evaluate their instructional processes through interaction with other instructors. With both of these purposes in mind, this paper will proceed to describe the **philosophy, objectives, and assignments/projects**, of Ohio University's Introduction to Organizational Communication, and Practicum in Organizational Communication.

Before discussing the two courses, a brief description of the undergraduate curriculum is in order. At Ohio University, the undergraduate major in Organizational Communication requires a total of 65 quarter hours (17 courses) in the School of Interpersonal Communication and a minimum of 28 quarter hours in each of two outside areas for a total of 121 quarter hours. A total of 192 quarter hours is required for graduation. The Organizational Communication major leads to a Bachelor of Science in Communication degree that is conferred upon approximately 125 students annually.

Within the requirement of 65 quarter hours are several courses that lay the groundwork for the introductory theory course and then the senior level courses. The undergraduate's familiarity with the communication discipline commences with classes in public speaking, introduction to speech communication, and verbal language behavior. From this point, the student moves to specific courses that provide more information about the basic areas of study in the discipline. Classes are offered in the techniques of small groups, interpersonal behavior, and communication theory. These three courses provide the foundation from which the student builds an understanding of the role of organizational communication within the speech communication context. It is only after the successful completion of these courses that the student may enroll in the introductory organizational communication theory course.

INTRODUCTION TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The two major elements which comprise the philosophy underpinning the Introduction to Organizational Communication course are: (1) students benefit from learning the role of theory in explaining behavior; (2) students need to be encouraged to think critically.

The position taken in the course is that organizations are a useful context in which to study communication behaviors. The purpose is not to introduce communication "skills" which can be exercised, stored, and called up when students leave the classroom. Instead, students are encouraged to see how various theoretical perspectives can be used to explain the communication activities of organizations. Little emphasis in put on the "how to do" communication in organizations in favor of illustrating ways of "how to think about" the communication activities of organizations. Organizations are assumed to be a complex arena in which many communication behaviors occur. To make sense out of the complexity, students are likely better able to make good judgments regarding their own behaviors if they are able to segment the complexities and identify the types of behaviors instead of relying upon "sure-fire techniques" and "quick-fix recipes" for organizational performance. As there are clearly no good answers for ensuring organizational success, understanding how theory can be used to

explain behaviors is seen as a productive means for, giving students the capacity to ask good questions.

But as the perfunctory learning of skills is objectionable, so is the rote acquisition of theory inadequate for understanding the complexities of organizations. Theories are only abstractions. By themselves, they are able to explain nothing. And as an abstraction, a theory's domain is much neater than the frequently over-lapping relationships a theory attempts to explain. For this reason, students are encouraged to think critically about the theories they are introduced to. As theories are introduced, the student is expected to identify the inadequacies of the theory. With some careful prodding, students discover the assumptions on which the theories are based, and decide whether they are willing to make the same assumptions. In discussion, students consider the prescriptions for behavior implied by the theories, and think about the possible ramifications such behaviors may have on the organization. The writing assignments require students to compare theories to "practice" and specify the ways by which theory may be improved. In a short time, students learn that theories are only ways to think about things. A few students go so far as developing their own theories for explaining organizational communication.

The values inherent in this philosophy become the goals for the Introduction to Organizational Communication course.

Presently, the following four objectives represent the philosophy behind the course.

1. To establish a firm understanding of theories useful for explaining communication processes in the organizational context.

In particular, students are exposed to the several theoretical perspectives which can be used to explain the communication processes which comprise organizational activity. The course begins by illustrating the different types of explanations which result from applying mechanistic, interactive, or transactional models of communication to organizational contexts. Then, considerable attention is given to classical, human relations, and systems' theories of organizational behaviors. Although these theories are drawn from management and administrative science, the course focuses on the relevance these theories have for understanding the communication processes of organizations. For example, classical theory is examined for its implications on the types of messages and the flow of messages through the organization. Human relations theory is considered for its assumptions about how people respond to messages. System theory is examined for its emphasis on the inter-relationship of the components of an organization, and the communication activities of an organization as it interfaces with the environment. Finally, students are introduced to the

"organization as culture" model to illustrate the symbolic processes organizational members use to make sense of their participation in organizations.

2. To specify the communication activities of organizations and provide an understanding of the expectations organizations may have for their communication activities.

Asking a new class "What is it that organizational communication studies?" always produces responses that are never less than amazing! The most articulate response has been "to study how communication makes organizations run better." That answer isn't surprising since the popular literature, and much of our academic research, has been in the pursuit of describing the communication practices which promote organizational functioning. Much of the course is devoted to discussing the communication activities which are assumed to make a difference in the functioning of an organization. The activities are categorized into three areas: (1) Information management. In this section, students are exposed to issues regarding the types of information exchanged in organizations, information flow, and how organizations determine information adequacy. (2) Behavior regulation. In this section, persuasion theory, motivation theory, and leadership theory are examined. Consideration is also given to the constraints organizational settings impose on indivi-

duals, how power is defined in organizations, and the interaction which occurs in managing. (3) Problem solving. Two topics comprise this section. The first is decision making in organizations. Here small group theory is expanded to specify the decision making processes of the more complex setting of an organization. The second topic is conflict management, in which students are introduced to the ways organizations use symbols to manage conflict.

3. To develop the capacity to apply theoretical explanations to organizational settings.

Too often, students leave theory courses convinced that theory is "this stuff found in books, but which doesn't apply to anything." Without the opportunity to compare theory to practice, students can be expected to have little regard for theory. Although instructors can show how the applications are possible, hearing it from the "front line" seems to be far more convincing. To get students to the "front line" and encourage them to evaluate the explanatory power of theory, students are asked to interview an organizational manager. The assignment requires the student to select a theory discussed in the course, and determine how well the theory explains the communication activities of the manager and the manager's organization. Two "realizations" usually characterize their papers. The first is that although many managers don't know they're doing it, they seem to follow

some version of "textbook" theories when they explain their own communication practices. Second, students often find that even though managers have theories, most manager's communication activities are often contradictory with the prescriptions of their own theories. Stuck with the problem of reconciling the prescriptions with behaviors, students often develop their own complex contingency models to explain how it is managers say one thing and do something else.

4. To encourage students to criticize theories for their inadequacies, and then to develop their own alternative explanations.

Through out the first weeks of June, educators stand up at commencement exercises to remind their audiences that they have "now learned to think for themselves." Too often, however, the educational experience doesn't actively encourage students to really think for themselves. The fourth objective of the introductory course in organizational communication is a reminder that students need and deserve the opportunity to evaluate what they have been learning, identify the inadequacies, and develop their own solutions. Success in organizations must, in some way, be related to creativity, and the ability to communicate persuasively ones' original ideas. To provide an experience which encourages original and creative thinking, the last assignment of the course asks the students to select some area of organizational

communication which needs its theories improved. Since students are usually reluctant about being critical, this assignment is a group project so that some form of the "risky shift" will occur. The assignment asks for a "fun" class presentation in which the group attempts to convince the class that they have a better explanation. In addition, the group is asked to write a "scholarly" paper in which they present the research and analysis which defends their position. Most of the time, the groups end up "re-inventing" the wheel. If the objective is to produce the definitive theoretical treatise on organizational communication, then the activity is not going to be worthwhile. But since the objective is to learn how ideas are developed, presented, and defended, re-inventing wheels is a useful exercise.

The positioning of the Introduction to Organizational Communication course in the undergraduate curriculum serves a useful function. In that it occurs after the student has already had several skill and theory courses, it allows an opportunity for the student to consider how the skills and theories may be applied in the context of organizations. As a prerequisite for the Senior Practicum in Organizational Communication, the course provides the theoretical foundation necessary for the supervised practical application of previously learned material.

SENIOR PRACTICUM IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The final course in the Organizational Communication major is the Senior Practicum in Organizational Communication. Typically taken during the last quarter of the senior year, the practicum offers the student a setting in which to apply what has been learned in theory courses in the major or minor areas. The following discussion will examine the philosophy underpinning the course, objectives, relationship of the project to the objectives, and the function of the course in the program of study.

A paper presented by James at last year's ICA convention detailed the internal structure and operation of the practicum course so that material is not repeated here; however, a brief summary is provided for clarity. Students in the practicum class become active members of a real-to-life organization, The Institute for Communication Improvement (I.C.I.). As I.C.I. employees, the students are required to perform internal, organizational roles and external, client-centered roles. I.C.I. has a complete reporting hierarchy ranging from the Board of Directors through the Vice-President for Operations to the staff members in each department. Students assume roles beginning with the Divisional Directors who report to the V.P. for Operations.

The practicum course was developed in response to stu-

dent perceptions that there should be an opportunity for students to "pull it all together" before graduation. Likewise, faculty members were interested in providing a forum for the students to apply their skills while also providing services to the university community which would otherwise be unaffordable.

The movement toward creating the Senior Practicum in Organizational Communication was the amalgam of the requests of the students in the major and the concerns of the faculty teaching in the Organizational Communication program. The concern of the students was a very practical one -- they wanted the chance to see if they could really do the things they were being taught to do. The problem was that the teaching was primarily in a classroom setting which did not permit the application of the skills and theories to real life situations. At the same time, it was important not to push the students too soon into situations they might be ill-equipped to handle.

Since the majority of Organizational Communication undergraduates at Ohio University are intending to enter the job market and not immediately pursue graduate degrees, the faculty were interested in helping the students become as marketable as possible when graduating from an academic program. It was important that the students had a strong theoretical foundation from which to draw their skills. This foundation should include an understanding of general communication

theories and models, small groups, dyadic communication, persuasion, conference leadership, campaign behaviors, interviewing, and statistics.

The philosophy of the practicum course is to provide students with the opportunity to utilize all their knowledge and skills while undertaking a project for an organization.

The second consideration in this discussion of the practicum course is that of the course objectives. Five objectives were designed for the course. The objectives are an attempt to operationalize the philosophy behind the course in such a way that the students have a clear understanding of what they should be able to do upon completion of the class -- function successfully in an organization.

1. To familiarize students with organizational processes in a real-to-life organization.

The uncertainty involved in moving from the closed environment of the academic community into the unknowns of the first postgraduation job can be minimized if students understand some of the expectations accompanying such a move. The practicum class is organized so that students complete a job application, resume and an interview for their position in I.C.I. The employee position the student assumes is also structured so each student has input into the duties and responsibilities of that position. It is intentional that there is ambiguity and uncertainty in the initial

stages of the class so that the students are required to cope from the beginning.

2. To enable students to assume organizational roles that mirror actual experiences in organizations.

Individuals in organizations seldom assume a single invariable organizational role at the outset of their employment. For this reason, students in the practicum class assume multiple roles. These roles are generally divided between the internal roles, which are essentially organizational maintenance roles, and the external, client-oriented task roles. It is quite often very instructional for students to be expected to operate in dual capacities when they are conditioned to "be" one thing or another in most of their university courses. Since that "being is often passive, learning to be proactive is another step toward greater career success.

3. To provide students with the means to demonstrate the extent to which they understand organizational concepts.

Many university classes set-up the "organizational culture" on the syllabus by stating that "such and such will happen at a particular time and everyone will be prepared." In contrast, the culture of the practicum class and I.C.I. is

created by the students as they engage in their organizational roles -- it is never intentionally created by the instructors. Too often speech communication graduates are able to prepare speeches or engage in interesting group discussions, but they do not understand the processes operating in group cohesion or disunity, etc. In the practicum course the students have the opportunity to observe specific behaviors and reason through why they happened and how they can be encouraged or discouraged in the future.

4. To facilitate students in the application of the skills and knowledge learned in other courses.

This objective is a logical extension of the previous statement. As students demonstrate an ability to observe and reason through why behaviors or actions are occurring, they must also be able to do something constructive about those behaviors. It is insufficient to complain that their subordinates won't work, they must know how to persuade and motivate those subordinates to work for the attainment of the organizational goals. In the external, client-oriented relationships, the students must be able to analyze situations before communicating -- what are the needs of the listener, etc.

5. To provide the "capstone" experience in the Organizational Communication major's college career.

To "pull it all together" is the primary rationale for this objective. If Organizational Communication majors are going to be successful in their job searches, they must be able to articulate what their major prepares them to do. Unless they know what they can and cannot do the process will not be completed to the satisfaction of potential employers. The practicum course is intended to provide the students with that articulation.

The relationship of the course project to the objectives is self-evident. The quarterly project usually involves students in assessing the needs of a client, developing a program to meet those needs, and evaluating the success of the program. In the five years the practicum course has existed, the projects have ranged from communication audits of social service agencies to the design and implementation of a peer counseling program in the School of Interpersonal Communication.

Students engaged in the project demonstrate their ability to use resources, think creatively, solve unique problems, carry out long-term planning, and devise assessment and evaluation processes. They must interact with the clients on a professional basis and handle problems immediately. The project enables them to apply the theories and concepts

of four years of classroom education to a specific series of requests from a client. In sum, the project is the students' testing ground.

The function served by the practicum course is a critical one. The Organizational Communication students know that before they complete their major they will be required to demonstrate their proficiency in a variety of areas. It can be asserted that students in management and business programs learn about the structure of organizations. Students in Organizational Communication programs learn how human beings function within those structures and the means for modifying them as needed. To operate within those organizational structures the students must understand the impact of structure on function and vice versa. The Senior Practicum in Organizational Communication provides the opportunity for the students to gain that knowledge before they are in their first job and the risks are significantly higher.

Ten sections of the practicum course have been offered during the last five years. Each section has been different both in its student composition and its projects; however, there have been similarities. Students are generally enthusiastic about the opportunities presented by the course. The faculty are usually satisfied that the students have learned something that will stand them in a better position upon graduation.

CONCLUSION

The two courses discussed in this paper do more than complement each other. Their relationship is not simply one of providing theory for practical application. Both courses are committed to the position that students are benefited far more by developing the ability to make their own good judgments than by learning either theories or skills.

Universities and colleges no longer have the luxury of remaining aloof from the mundane activities of those who support them. The clamor of the eighties is for students trained to participate competitively in a fast moving world in which information has become a commodity. The temptation is to turn our classrooms into trade schools, disseminate as much information as possible, and produce students for jobs, rather than lives. The consequence of such shallow thinking is evident as we witness the growing concern for the lack of excellence in organizational endeavors.

The alternative is to provide students with educational experiences which promote their capacity to think. In communication studies, the emphasis should be on providing tools by which students can critically examine behaviors which are otherwise taken for granted. There are clearly no guaranteed formulas for any communication activity. There are guidelines which can be turned to, and successfully applied to the particular context, if the student is able to reason

through the situation. It is our hope that the two courses described in this paper provide the type of experience in which students learn what tools are useful, what new tools must be learned, and how the tools inform rather than constrain their behaviors.

Ohio University
School of Interpersonal
Communication
Spring, 1984

INCO 245
Introduction to
Organizational
Communication

Michael Smilowitz
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Course Overview:

Popular wisdom says that organizational problems are the result of poor communication. Whether the organization is a business firm, a civil service agency, or a volunteer service group, members of organizations often attribute their failures (but surprisingly, not very often their successes) to problems with communication.

Although the importance of communication in organizations is a widespread belief, organizations typically treat communication only as a secondary concern. That is, organizations don't worry about their communication until there is a problem. In this course, communication in the organization is not seen as something which is looked at only when there are problems. Organizations are not simply "things" which use communication. Rather, as this course will attempt to show, it is the process of communication which forms, maintains, and changes every facet of organizational activity.

Popular wisdom also says that "Communication solves problems." This course, again, takes a different position: Communication cannot, does not, and will not solve all problems of the organization. The objective of this course is not to provide simple recipes for improving organizational communication and performance. Instead, the objective of this course is to reveal how complex communication really is. Instead of "answers" this course is intended to provide understandings which will allow you, as members of organizations, to ask the "good questions" necessary to formulating your own good answers.

This is an introductory course, designed to provide the opportunity to study communication within the

context of organizational settings. Most of our attention will be devoted to becoming familiar with some of the theories used in explaining organizations. For the most part, we will focus on the traditional approaches. Towards the end of the quarter, we will explore some alternative approaches to the study of organizational communication. Your responsibility through out the quarter will be to critically examine all of the theories you will be introduced to, so that you will be able to formulate your own explanations.

In particular, these are the four objectives I hope you accomplish by the end of the quarter:

1. A firm understanding of the theories discussed in lectures and the texts and the ability to describe the implications these theories have for organizational communication.

2. The ability to generate key questions about each of the theories, and the capacity to apply these questions to organizational activities.

3. The ability to specify the communication activities of the organization, and have a good idea of what organizations expect of you when you perform those activities.

4. The capacity to criticize the theories presented in class and the ability to develop your own alternative explanations which make up for the inadequacies in theory.

Readings:

Koehler, J.W., Anatol, K.W.E. & Applbaum, R.L. Organizational Communication: Behavioral Perspectives, 2nd. ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981.

Frost, P.J., Mitchell, V.F. & Nord, W.R., eds. Organizational Reality: Reports from the Firing Line, 2nd. ed. Glenville, Ill: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1982.

Ohio University
School of Interpersonal
Communication
Spring, 1984

INCO 445
Practicum in
Organizational
Communication

Anita James
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Course Overview:

A practicum allows for the supervised practical application of previously studied theory. This course has been designed to provide you with a capstone experience, in which you will apply the theoretical materials you have learned to an actual setting. Your abilities in applying theory to practice, your skills in communicating, and your capability for being creative and showing initiative will all be exercised in the situations provided by this course.

Aside from the training sessions and required assignments, the structure for this course depends on you. It is the the intent of this course to allow you maximum opportunity to exercise your own creative skills and judgments. At first, there will be much ambiguity and tension. As the class begins to mature as a work group and the class members orient themselves to the task and to each other as working professionals, at least some of the ambiguity will be replaced by self-directed structure. Many times there will be frustration, always there will be a challenge, but at the end, you should have had the opportunity to apply what you know in a setting not too unlike the settings awaiting you.

In particular, there are five objectives for this course:

1. To familiarize students with organizational processes in a real to life situation.

2. To enable students to assume organizational roles that mirror actual experiences in organizations.

3. To provide students with the means to deomonstrate the extent to which they understand organizational concepts.

4. To facilitate students in the application of the skills and knowledge learned in other courses.

5. To provide the "capstone" expereince in the organizational communication major's college career.

The following learning activities are meant to help you achieve the above objectives.

1. Readings: There is no assigned text for this course. It is expected that you have developed your skills in using the library. Students who wish to attempt a course grade of a B or better, will appropriately support the claims made in their papers with adequate citations to the relevant literature.

2. Organizational Training Sessions: These sessions are designed to provide you with content material relevant to your performance as organizational members and to provide you the experience of attending a training program.

3. Informational Seminars: These sessions are designed to provide you with information that is not appropriate for a training session.

4. Written Projects: Written assignments include a resume and cover letter, a statement of your objectives for your performance in I.C.I., a self-evaluation of your own performance, an individually written analysis of the organizational communication practices of I.C.I., and a technical report prepared by your department and division.

5. Participation in I.C.I.: All class members are expected to fully participate in all task activities of the Institute for Communication Improvement.

Grading:

Final course grades are based on your percentage of the possible points. There are 450 possible points:

1.	Resume and cover letter	10 points
2.	Statement of objectives	10 points
3.	Written self-appraisal	30 points
4.	Analysis of the organizational communication practices of I.C.I.	100 points
5.	Technical Report	150 points
6.	Internal Work Assignment Evaluation	100 points
7.	Peer evaluation	50 points

90% of the total points is necessary for an A, 80% for a B, 70% for a C, 60% for a D, and students below 59% will fail the course. Plus or minus grades will be assigned based on the increments within each category.